

Indigenous peoples pin high hopes on launch of UN forum

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After campaigning for years, a native leader from Canada says he hopes the creation of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues this spring will give native issues the kind of world-level attention they deserve.

The forum will be launched May 13 at United Nations headquarters in New York. Invitations for the occasion will go to Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general, along with Mary Robinson, the UN high commissioner for human rights, and other dignitaries.

Several forum members have met with Robinson, who endorsed the organization and said she was committed to making it a success.

"If people of that calibre come to the first meeting, I think it would show that this is a serious forum that will be taken seriously by the United Nations," said Willie Littlechild, a member of the forum and legal counsel for the Four Nations in Hobbema, Alta.

Littlechild noted that many studies have been conducted by various UN bodies and independent experts on issues important to indigenous peoples, such as treaty and land rights, culture, health and education.

The permanent forum could

begin its work by immediately looking at ways to implement recommendations made on these matters, he said.

"The first meeting is very very important because it's a new body at the United Nations," Littlechild said. "It will be watched from several perspectives, so it must have a good, strong start."

Littlechild is a Cree in the Four Nations of Hobbema. He has been campaigning for indigenous rights for decades and has participated in drafting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

He said a lot has changed since he first came to the United Nations to champion the cause of the 350 million native peoples around the world.

"In the last 25 years that I've been involved, at the very first meeting we couldn't even enter the building and now we see ourselves sitting equally with states (national governments) at the highest level of the United Nations," he said.

Grand Chief Ted Moses of the Grand Council of the Crees and Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberto Menchu first proposed the idea for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues during the 1993 Human Rights Conference in Vienna.

After years of negotiations, the forum has been established as a consultative body to the Economic and Social Council, which is the second-highest level

within the UN system.

The forum is composed of 16 independent experts, eight indigenous members and eight representatives of national governments.

As it is currently structured, the forum will meet once a year and have a permanent secretariat that will work throughout the year to pursue studies relevant to indigenous issues.

Canada and Russia are the only two countries that are represented by both an indigenous and government member. The Canadian government representative is Wayne Lord of the Department of Indian Affairs.